THE

SPEECH

OF

SIR HERCULES LANGRISHE, &c.

1795.

BRITISH
MUSEUM

C. S. Lefroy

THE SPEECH OF SIR HERCULES LANGRISHE, K

IN THE

IRISH HOUSE OF COMMONS,

ON THE

SUBJECT

OF A

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM,

SPOKEN IN 1785.

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THE

SPEECH, &c.

PARLIAMENTARY REFORM having, at this time, become the object of ſome attention, we are induced to re-publiſh the ſubſtance of a Speech, publiſhed here in the year 1785, which was made on that ſubject in the Iriſh Parliament by Sir Hercules Langriſhe, Bart.

Mr. FLOOD moved, "That the Houſe "reſolve itſelf into a Committee to conſider

" of an inſtruction to the Committee ap-
" pointed to prepare a Bill for the more equal
" repreſentation of the people, to receive a
" clauſe, That, the better to promote popu-
" lation in decayed and contracted boroughs,
" no borough in the province of Ulſter, hav-
" ing leſs than 140, and in the other pro-
" vinces 70 voters, ſhall return more than
" One Member to Parliament."

Sir HERCULES LANGRISHE ſaid——Mr. Speaker, The object of this motion, taken abſtractedly, is certainly deſirable, and carries with it the ſtrong recommendation of bearing a reference to Lord Chatham's notion of Parliamentary Reform, which was, " the pouring ſome young blood into the conſtitution." 'Tis true, Sir, nothing that I know of can promote population ſo effectually as this ſame infuſion of *young blood*; however,

neither

neither on that account, nor on any authority, however reſpectable, ſhall I be induced to increaſe the maſs or the motion of the blood when the conſtitution is in full vigour; and much leſs ſhould I be inclined to do ſo when the pulſe beats high, and diſcovers ſome *ſymptoms of a fever*. I, therefore, feel no reluctance in voting againſt the motion.—It is a *part* of a ſyſtem which, I think, *in the whole* inadmiſſible, and I ſhall therefore oppoſe it in the firſt inſtance. Though the queſtion immediately before you does not, it is true, go to the whole ſubject of a Parliamentary Reform, yet the very able ſpeech of the honourable Member who introduced it, ſo fully explained the *whole plan*, and ſo ſtrongly enforced the neceſſity of the meaſure, that I cannot ſuffer it to remain under the uncontroverted recommendation of ſo able an advocate, but muſt take the liberty

to follow him into the ſubject at large, and ſtate to the Houſe my ſentiments on it.

And indeed, Sir, as the various aſſemblies which have of late been ſo generally convened throughout this country, for the purpoſes of *peace* and the propagation of *political learning* amongſt the lower orders of the people, have diſplayed ſo much of their wiſdom and eloquence on this ſubject, I may hope it will not be thought an indecorum, if the Houſe of Commons aſſume to ſhare in the common privilege; and that *we* may be permitted, with the uſual authority of *full and free debate*, to examine the *plan*, the *principle*, and the *progreſs* of a meaſure that affects to be a *reformation of Parliament*.

As ſoon as a reſtitution of every right, and a conceſſion of every favour that you could

deſire

deſire or *demand*, had ſatisfied every rational wiſh in the nation, it was natural to expect that the patriot's care ſhould be awakened to look out for ſomething that might provide for the *agitation of the day*, and protect the public mind from the *laſſitude of contentment*; for it was much to be feared, in thoſe degenerate days, when the people ſhould ſee commerce ready to reward their induſtry, and the beſt conſtitution in the world ready to enſure their acquiſitions; that they would be but too apt to ſurrender themſelves to the cold dictates of *common ſenſe*, and degrade their high exertions by embracing the condition of *inglorious happineſs*. But the public virtue of this country has always been ready to awaken their ſenſibility to *nobler purſuits*, and cultivate the growth of *unceaſing demand*; for the public virtue of this country has always ſupplied us with ſome ſpirits ſo exalted,

that

that they aſpire at ſomething *more than liberty*; and whoſe conceptions of proſperity deſpiſe the narrow bounds of *peace* and *affluence*.

To reſcue the people from this *ignoble mediocrity*—to ſecure them from this *deluſive tranquillity*—to keep alive their *cares* and *fears*, and their *jealouſies*, that they may neither ſlumber nor ſleep even in the arms of freedom and peace—the ſubject of Parliamentary Reform naturally preſented itſelf, as that of all others moſt *likely* to *inflame*—becauſe it was that of all others moſt *unlikely* to be *underſtood*---It was a combination of politics, and juriſprudence, and hiſtory, and experiment, and ſpeculation, ſo complicated as to furniſh every thing to *perplex*, and nothing to inform the public mind. The *object* ambiguous, the *means* unaſcertained, its preachers

preachers could attribute to it any perfection they pleaſed without the hazard of confutation---it was a doctrine that the high prieſts, who expounded it from their altars, explained every one in a manner different from the other---a doctrine on which the ſeveral oracles that had been conſulted abroad, returned reſponſes full of *ambiguity*, *inconſiſtency*, and *contradiction*---It was a doctrine to be propagated by *pure faith*, becauſe it was a myſtery above the underſtanding of the people---It was enough that the doctrine was *new* and *obſcure*, to enſure it ſome followers amongſt a believing multitude; for there never was a falſe doctrine impoſed upon the world, except a doctrine the world could not underſtand. The miſſionaries of reform, though they could not, like Mahomet, employ *miracles* to propagate the faith, were,

like

like him, determined to lend it the aſſiſtance of the *ſword* *.

Under theſe circumſtances it naturally followed, that this ſubject aſſumed the *ſanction of the people*, who knew nothing of the matter; and that the force of the nation might be directed againſt its own tranquillity, it has been cloathed with a degree of authority manifeſtly affecting to preclude the diſcuſſion, and enforce the compliance of Parliament.---I do not mean to allude to any expreſſions that may caſually have fallen in the warmth of debate from Gentlemen in this Houſe, which ought to be conſidered as the effuſions of ardent feelings and good intentions; but I muſt obſerve upon expreſſions which I have heard every where: we have

* Conducted by an armed convention.

been

been told, Sir, that " a Parliamentary Reform is a meaſure which the people *are determined* to carry"—That " it was hoped they would not lay down their *arms* till they obtained it." And Gentlemen have *propheſied* too, " that they would not be *ſatisfied* without it."—Now, Sir, let me only obſerve, if ſentiments like theſe ſhould ever have eſcaped from Gentlemen of worth and underſtanding, conſider how ſuch ideas would expand themſelves in the hot and vacant mind of the *ignorant* and the *tumultuary*.

What do theſe words import? Why, Sir, theſe words, tranſlated into common Engliſh, imply, " that the people ſhould *reform* Parliament, by aboliſhing its authority, and *renovate* the conſtitution by an act of *violence*;"—for every man knows if the people

are determined to carry a meaſure *at all events*, they are determined to carry it whether Parliament approve or not; and if the latter be the caſe, to ſubſtitute *force* in the place of *law*, and *arms* in the place of conſtitution. And as to prophecies of diſcontent or tumult, I muſt ſay it is from the frailty and vanity of man too much to expect, that when he aſſumes the gift of prophecy, he will not endeavour to fulfil his prophecy; at leaſt it may be feared that even if his prophecy goes to public commotion, his pride and his paſſions become intereſted againſt any endeavour to prevent that commotion, becauſe that would be an endeavour to falſify his own prediction. I cannot therefore avoid thinking, that ſuch prophecies have more in them of *fabrication* then *foreſight*; that they tend more to *promote* then *provide* againſt the evils they announce; and therefore if I

had

had the authority of a Patriarch, I would call aloud on the people and caution them againſt ſuch prophets—they may *betray* but cannot ſerve them—They may indeed ſeduce them, like the tribes of old, to wade through a *red ſea*, but they would afterwards lead them into *captivity*, or forſake them in the *wilderneſs*; for they cannot put them into poſſeſſion of the land they have promiſed them *.

I know very well that ſeveral rational and reſpectable gentlemen are of opinion in favour of a *Reform*. I ſee ſeveral ſuch in this houſe, for whoſe perſons and opinions I entertain the utmoſt reſpect—I muſt however take the liberty to ſay, I differ from them in opinion; and that from my inter-

* Alluding to the recovery of forfeited eſtates held out to them.

courſe with the world, I am convinced the ſober ſenſe of the nation differs from them too. The rational wiſhes of the people muſt always have the greateſt weight in this Houſe; but they muſt flow through the channels of the conſtitution, and muſt be collected, not from the *aſſertion* of any, however reſpectable, but by the beſt *obſervation* we can make; and my beſt obſervation convinces me that gentlemen are deceived when they ſtate a Parliamentary Reform as the *darling object* and *fondeſt wiſh* of the people. Why, Sir, the fact is impoſſible! They are not ſufficiently acquainted with it to entertain ſuch a predeliction. I am ſure if you could ſuppoſe that poſſible, you muſt ſuppoſe them more blindly devoted in their fond attachments, even than the ſovereign Princes you read of; you ſuppoſe them enamoured of an object, without ever having been gratified

gratified even by looking at the *picture* of it.

If indeed there could be ſuch a maſs of oddity in the human mind, as that the people were in love before-hand with every thing that calls itſelf Reform, I could furniſh a ſeraglio for their raptures. I have in my pocket ſeventeen different plans for the Reform of Parliament, and I could collect as many more; becauſe Reform is a word to which every Reformiſt annexes his own idea; and plans of Reform are as various as the various ideas of the human mind. But I will never believe that the people can devote themſelves at once to objects ſo diſſimilar, which differ as much in complexion and diſpoſition as the Æthiopian and the Circaſſian. Neither will I believe they could be ſo weak as to found a paſſion

on

on *anticipation* or *authority*. I could as ſoon be perſuaded they were in love with the climate of the moon, becauſe one Mr. Wilkins, a very eloquent man, for reaſons beſt known to himſelf, aſſured them, that it was much a better climate than their own.

As to the mere *popular cry* on this ſubject, examine it impartially, and you will find it proceeded from a very ſmall proportion of the people indeed, and of that part of the people, too, who are the leaſt capable to judge, and the leaſt diſpoſed to be ſatisfied. But as their number was very ſmall, they were obliged to raiſe their voice the louder, in order to make themſelves heard. Peace and induſtry are ever *ſilent*; diſcontent and diſorder are ever *clamorous*; and you know very well that ten men (or even ten women) that

that are clamorous, make a greater noiſe than ten thouſand who are ſatisfied and ſilent. But, indeed, when a man talks of the *voice of the people*, he is very apt to mean the voice of thoſe people who echo back his own voice.

Now, Sir, I ſay wherever the people collectively have given an opinion in favour of Reform, they have ſpoken by a decided *minority* of the voters in the place whoſe ſenſe they would convey; and the public opinion on this ſubject is conſpicuous in the elections of Delegates to the National Congreſs. I do not mean to ſay one word as to the legality or illegality of that meaſure: that has been already ſufficiently explained. I know too that ſeveral reſpectable gentlemen were elected to that aſſembly; I only ſpeak of it at preſent merely as it bears teſtimony

to the national ſentiment; and when we conſider the *manner* of the elections, where they *were* held, and the number of places where *no ſuch* were held at all, it is impoſſible not to conclude, that the ſenſe of the nation was adverſe to the meaſure. It was admitted that the whole province of Munſter ſent no Delegate; and I am ſure every county or city within my knowledge, which elected Delegates, elected them by a decided minority of thoſe intitled by law to vote for Repreſentatives.

The Honourable Member who introduced this bill knows very well the election for the county in which he reſides was not held even in the body of the county itſelf; it was held in another county, were the freeholders had not a right by law to exerciſe the elective franchiſe, even under the *King's writ*;

writ; and though I do allow that five reſpectable gentlemen were the object of their choice, yet no man alive will ſay that the ſenſe of 1200 freeholders was expreſſed by an aſſembly convened out of their county, and compoſed of thirty, or forty, or fifty of thoſe freeholders, and the populace of a large city.

We are all very well acquainted with the manner in which the election for the *metropolis* was conducted. I do not mean any diſreſpect to the Gentlemen that were elected; I dare ſay they were very worthy of the truſt—but the manner was this; after ſeveral unſucceſsful attempts in the uſual place of election, it was, by a ſort of popular certiorari, removed to a place never before reſorted to, as the *ſeat* of *election*, though it has lately been the ſcene of ſummary juſ-

tice *. A part of the city, perhaps recommended by the popularity of its name—it is called *the Liberty*—or, perhaps, preferred to all others, from an opinion that in that centre of peace and induſtry, in that ſacred ſuburb, diverſity of opinion would be ſilenced; that the friends of experiment were ſure to find a deciſive ſupport, and that though the election might not be perfectly *free*, it would certainly be *unanimous*. I ſhall not trouble you with a deſcription of other elections throughout this country, but ſubmit it to the obſervation of gentlemen to judge in general what teſtimonies they bore of the national opinion.

The grand *aggregate body* were indeed liberal and comprehenſive in their invita-

* A part of the ſuburbs of Dublin remarkable for riots.

tions;

tions; they looked to the Eaſt and the Weſt, and the North and the South at once, but unfortunately the whole kingdom was not at that time ſufficiently informed, as they are now, that the great men who conducted and enlightened that aſſembly, were really perſons whoſe condition in life gave them an authority, and whoſe education that degree of knowledge which could entitle them to ſtand forth, and talk to the nation about a change of its conſtitution. Their ſummons, therefore, was diſregarded—thoſe who were bidden refuſed to come —one would not come "becauſe he had a piece of ground—another would not come becauſe he had five yoke of oxen—another would not come becauſe he had got a wife;" —(and excellent reaſons in my opinion for not coming!) I will not ſay, that on theſe refuſals they ſent out into the ſtreets and

lanes of the city, into the highways and hedges for gueſts, becauſe I know reſpectable gueſts were gotten; but this I muſt ſay, that their elections afterwards became ſo conciſe and ſummary, that if the ſenſe of the nation had not been decidedly againſt the meaſure, it is impoſſible the Houſe ſhould not have been filled.

Now, Sir, as to the interference of the people at large on every political queſtion, I am willing to allow it every extent conſiſtent with our form of government. The people have a right to expect from us every thing in our power to promote their real happineſs; they are entitled to our love while they behave well; they are entitled to the protection of the laws whilſt they obey them, and they are entitled to liberty whilſt they will ſhare it with others. But the

conſtitution

conſtitution and the laws, and the nature of things have drawn a line, and fixed a boundary to their interference in the ſtate; they are the object of all government, but not government itſelf; whenever they have been ſo, their dominion has been tyranny, and the public condition unhappineſs. It is very true, *human nature* is the ſame in all degrees of men, but *education* and *intercourſe* enlighten ſome minds above others, and men muſt be exalted on ſome little eminence above the level of the community to look far into remote objects; but when you obſerve men of low rank and condition, the *obſcure*, the *ignorant* and the *deſperate*, deſirous to ſtep into a ſphere to which they are inadequate, you may be ſure the ſtate is diſordered. If the man that cleans your ſhoes were to aſpire at that chair, which you fill with ſo much ability, you would laugh

at

at the abſurdity if you were not controuled in your mirth by the reflection "that it was a ſymptom of *public diſorder*."

Thus much as to the national opinion!—I ſhall now trouble you with a few words as to the meaſure itſelf, and the occaſion that calls for it.

Before you ſubmit to theſe *projects of alteration*, before you venture to ſtake your whole capital of conſtitution on the *hazard of this die*, conſider over and over again, and deliberate maturely on the neceſſity that impels you to it; for it would be madneſs to incur the dangers that muſt follow any conſtitutional change, the conſequences of which no man living can foreſee, unleſs it were to remove ſome real and preſſing grievance: now let me aſk the moſt enthuſiaſtic

ſiaſtic admirer of civil liberty, what grievance has he to complain of? Is it a grievance, that in the courſe of three years you have obtained the reſtitution of every right, and the confirmation of every charter which have exalted the Britiſh conſtitution above all others in the world?—that the whole range of your wiſhes has been conſulted, and every wiſh complied with? Is it a grievance that your judicature is your own; your army your own; your judges independent, your commerce free, and your Parliament ſupreme? It *may* be a grievance to *ſome* that theſe benefits were accompliſhed without *bloodſhed*, and that the lottery of public *commotion* has not been opened to every deſperate adventurer! If this be a grievance, it is the only one I know of; and as to the conſtitutional *balance* of the

ſtate,

ſtate, can any men complain that the *popular part* is ſuppreſſed in its functions, or that it is too *weak* for the hand of power? Look abroad through the community, and tell me do you ſee any abridged in the exerciſe of civil liberty, and do you not ſee ſeveral in the exerciſe of the moſt abominable licentiouſneſs? deſtroying the landmarks that aſcertain *property*, and the bounds that divide free government from anarchy? State the courſe or current of power as you pleaſe! you can find no argument for this meaſure. If you attribute your late acquiſitions to the juſtice of the Crown, or the integrity of your Parliament, you find *there* no neceſſity for reform. If, on the other hand (as ſome gentlemen are fonder to do), you attribute them to the *high power of the people*, you find *there* no

argument

argument for a meaſure, the ſole object of which muſt be to increaſe that power already predominant; and in the exerciſe of which the people have not of late diſcovered much diſcretion.

But the great evil which diſturbs the mind of every ſtrict politician, and interrupts the labours of every ſpeculative artificer---that great evil which has acquired a name, which is eccho'd from one end of the country to the other, and is like every other *ſound* eccho'd, becauſe it is unſubſtantial---that conſummation of all evil is the *ariſtocracy*---the *baneful ariſtocracy!*---Why, Sir, that is a very fine word, it is derived from the Greek language, and therefore very prudently introduced, as being unintelligible to the unlearned multitude: but indeed I muſt ſay that the ſpirit of equality which diſtinguiſhes

the preſent time, has communicated the miſ-conception of this word to all ranks of people who have publicly made uſe of it---they do not mean by ariſtocracy (as Locke or Monteſquieu would) the power veſted in the nobles---No, Sir, they mean by it that particular influence which ſome individuals have acquired in the election of members to ſerve in Parliament.

Now, let me aſk any man of ſenſe, or any man of knowledge, whether he thinks, ſince the creation of the world, there ever was, or ever could have been, a free ſtate, in which the exerciſe or application of liberty could be ſo guarded, as that individuals muſt not either from *property*, from *talents*, from *reſidence*, from the capacity to *ſerve*, or the capacity to *deceive*, have acquired a degree of influence in elections, beyond the meaſure

of

of equality or the letter of the conſtitution; and in many caſes beyond the reach of competition? It ever has been, and it ever muſt be the caſe; and no plan of Parliamentary Reform that has ever yet been imagined, has had the ſmalleſt tendency to prevent it. I will indeed do them the juſtice to ſay, they *all* affect to transfer it, to wreſt this influence from the preſent poſſeſſors; but if that were accompliſhed, every body knows that after the morals of the people ſhall have been *reformed*, and the public peace and induſtry improved by a few years of election controverſy, and riot and corruption, this ſame influence muſt repoſe again in ſome hands or other; and it cannot be imagined that ſome men do not at this day indulge their hopes as to the favoured ſpot to which this influence may ſhift its reſidence.---The reform-

iſts do not appear deſirous, and they certainly do not endeavour to take meaſures for its extinction, becauſe they muſt know, what every body knows, that as long as men have the faculties of freedom, they will uſe it according to their fancy, or abuſe it according to their profligacy, or commute it according to their intereſt; until you can make the maſs of mankind univerſally wiſe and univerſally pure.

But I am not afraid to ſay, there is a degree of influence operating univerſally, ariſing from property, and other ſources too, which our conſtitution would not bluſh to recognize; and the power of the ariſtocracy (as it is called) if it be rooted in your ſoil; if it grows out of your land, will, like a great tree, give ſtrength and ſtability and ſhelter

to

to the earth that ſuſtains it; and hiſtory will teach you that this influence, of which you complain, has often proved the great interpoſition between the Crown and the People, and has been highly inſtrumental in preſerving to this day the beſt conſtitution in the world, which your inconſiſtency ſeems diſſatisfied with, and which your raſhneſs would commit to the hazard of experiment.

It has been ſaid the enemies of reform muſt admit, "that the repreſentation is *imperfect*, and that it is unreaſonable a ſmall town ſhould ſend as many repreſentatives as a large diſtrict." I anſwer, if by *imperfect* you mean *unequal*, it ever has been and ever muſt be ſo.---Perſonal equality of repreſentation (which is the only equality of repreſentation

ſentation I can conceive) would be a pure democracy, which, thank God! is not our conſtitution; and in a country like ours, where the great majority of the people do not profeſs the religion of the ſtate, it would be a democracy ſubverſive of the laws and religion eſtabliſhed.---The partial repreſentation you complain of is not only involved in the principles of our conſtitution, but (what ſome may think ſtronger) ſtands recognized in all your plans of *Parliamentary Reform*. For if you have any ſettled principle, and equality be your principle, how can you juſtify your conceſſion that a borough of 40 inhabitants ſhall ſend to Parliament as many Members as a county containing 7000 freeholders? You cannot object to inequality as an evil, and produce a remedy ſubject to the ſame objection. And as to the preſent

ſent decayed condition of ſome places now entitled to repreſentation, I ſhall only ſay, if you were to change the conſtruction of Parliament with every change of condition in every place endowed with the privilege of election, there would be an end to the ſtrength and ſtability of your conſtitution. And if your anceſtors had indulged their ſpeculations in ſuch experiments, the illuſtrious fabric of the Britiſh conſtitution would have been centuries ago levelled to the ground; and you would not at this day be debating in a free Parliament, under the protection of a form of government, which, with all its *inequalities*, is the admiration of the world; and which, with all its *imperfections*, is a thouſand times *more perfect* than any plan offered for its reform---a conſtitution whoſe inequality of repreſentation ſatisfied the wiſ-

dom

dom of your anceſtors, and rewarded the magnanimity of thoſe patriots who accompliſhed the glorious Revolution.

But it raiſes the indignation of Gentlemen to hear that ſeats in Parliament have been bought and ſold! I ſay, whenever that has happened it has been an abuſe of the elective franchiſe, and a violation of the law; and if it has ever came to the honourable Member's knowledge that ſuch practice has taken place, he ought to lay his hand on that particular borough. But if you would extinguiſh a general franchiſe becauſe in a particular inſtance it has been abuſed, I beg to know where you would ſtop; for if you admit this principle, it would lead you on to extinguiſh the freeholder's right to vote in counties, the citizen's right to vote in cities, and by degrees

grees to aboliſh every privilege that diſtinguiſhes a freeman, becauſe every ſuch privilege may be abuſed.

In judging of our great conſtitution, we deceive ourſelves by entering into *narrow detail* or *abſtract principles*. The Britiſh conſtitution is a great object to be ſeen, *through its general effects*, and felt by the *benefits it confers*. It is like thoſe great luminaries which are ſo far removed from common inſpection, that they are not to be viewed with a microſcopic eye. They diminiſh in their ſize, and recede from you when you attempt to examine them through artificial mediums.

And now, Sir, a few words as to the outline of the honourable Member's bill, as he has been pleaſed to lay it before you. By his

deſcription, it certainly muſt bear a ſtrong family likeneſs to that which we diſpoſed of in the laſt ſeſſion. Indeed I believe I might go farther, and ſay it is the very ſame, with the addition of one year's growth. Its ſize may be larger, and its dreſs ſomewhat different; but its features, its character, its complexion and diſpoſition nearly the ſame. And I freely confeſs I wonder not to find it more improved, conſidering it has had the advantage not only of the ableſt *private tuition* that this country could afford, but alſo the aſſiſtance of ſeveral *public academies*, ſeveral *learned ſeminaries*, which have been lately inſtituted in this country for the ſole purpoſe of *its education*.

[He proceeded to make ſeveral objections to the plan itſelf, as tending to render the repreſentation more unequal---to contract the baſis

baſis of legiſlation---to diminiſh the number both of conſtituents and repreſentatives---not to ſettle but diſturb the conſtitution; and that whether offered *in the whole* or by detail, it ſhould meet with his oppoſition.]

THE END.

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